Liberalism and Nationalism

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Liberalism today is on the defensive. Both critics and advocates warn that liberal democracies are in crisis. A proliferation of essays, articles, and books offer myriad diagnoses as to what ails us. As James Traub has put it, “The death of liberalism constitutes the publishing world’s biggest mass funeral since the death of God half a century ago.” But we should beware of a premature autopsy. Reckoning with liberalism’s challenges requires a sober disposition, lest we fall into theoretical error and practical excess. Rather than wholesale denunciation, an honest reckoning with liberalism’s shortcomings should spur us toward a renewal of that political order that has brought peace and prosperity to so many.

So how deep and enduring is the crisis? According to the punditry, warnings are evident on both the domestic and the international stage. The election of Donald Trump has been understood by both supporters and opponents as an expression of distress at the failures of American liberalism. Trump’s America First platform criticized institutions of modern liberalism such as NAFTA, NATO, and the Paris Agreement on climate change. His electoral success revealed the American electorate’s deep reservations about the value of such international cooperation. In Europe, Brexit has provoked anxiety about the potential disintegration of the European Union in the face of rising nationalism and populism — apprehensions exacerbated by the rise of right-wing parties like the National Rally (formerly the National Front) in France and the AfD in Germany. Moreover, the ongoing migration crisis has exposed rifts within the European community of nations, contributing to fears that the EU undermines national sovereignty. Thus Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary fear their participation in the EU will come at the cost of national identity; Hungarian

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Prime Minister Viktor Orban exemplifies this trend, with his vision for an avowedly illiberal Christian democracy. Triumphantalist expectations for liberal democracy after the fall of the Soviet Union have waned as liberalizing trends of the 1990s in countries as diverse as Turkey, Russia, and China have faltered. Across the globe, rival models of political order present formidable alternatives to liberal hegemony; populist nationalism, authoritarianism, and state capitalism are all on the rise. China presents an alternative socio-political and economic model that seeks access to world markets without transforming itself into an open society; revanchist Russia has successfully executed the first aggressive territorial expansion in Europe in decades; and in Turkey, the Philippines, and Egypt, authoritarian leaders appear to be on the rise. The recent spate of commentary in response to these developments reflects liberalism’s struggles to find its bearings in a changing world. In the midst of such contentious debate, how can we distill the essential from the incidental? Sober analysis reveals that beneath the cacophony, there is one recurring theme: The universalism implicit in liberalism appears incompatible with robust national particularism. The recurring accusation against liberalism is that it dissolves communal solidarity, leaving homogeneous atomism in its wake. Hence the anti-immigrant liberal-skeptic parties of Europe and America understand themselves as defending local identity. Politicians such as Nigel Farage, Ryszard Legutko, and Marine Le Pen argue that liberalism has morphed into a globalism that acknowledges as legitimate only the opinions of the cosmopolitan, progressive elite, thereby stifling the voice of the people. Most recently, this criticism has come mainly from the right. But only five years ago such arguments were commonplace on the left—for example, in the midst of the Euro crisis, the explicitly socialist Syriza party in Greece, led by Alexis Tsipras, sought to defend local autonomy from impersonal, technocratic international institutions. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were denounced as vehicles for capitalist ideology and neoliberal oppression. Whether on the left or the right, such critics see in liberalism an inability to tolerate national autonomy. To defend it from these accusations, liberalism’s advocates need to revive a liberal politics that is friendly to robust national cultures. Liberalism must prove itself to be less monolithic and more variegated, compatible with laws, customs, and mores inflected by different visions of national flourishing. This understanding of the possibilities inherent
in liberalism is not alien to the tradition of liberal thought; one of its greatest theorists and most intelligent advocates, the 18th-century French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu, recognized the need for combining, in the words of a recent study by Keegan Callanan, “moral universalism” with “political particularism.”

We can approach the question of how to balance moral universalism and political particularism by engaging in critical dialogue with several recent works that address the crisis of liberalism on two levels: from the perspective of foreign policy and international order on one hand, and of domestic policy and political theory on the other. In The Virtue of Nationalism, Yoram Hazony claims liberalism is an inherently imperial political philosophy, opposed in principle to the existence of diverse national states. In sharp disagreement with Hazony, Francis Fukuyama has argued that countering pernicious forms of identity politics on left and right will require reinvesting in a liberal nationalism based on creedal commitments. Robert Kagan, in The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World, argues for a different revival of liberalism: He defends the liberal international order sustained by American hegemony. But others raise grave doubts about this strategy. Hazony and scholars like John Mearsheimer argue that liberalism’s universalism leads to misguided imperial adventures, and the abandonment of a policy of liberal hegemony will be the key to a more stable world.

The juxtaposition of these authors brings several important questions into focus: Is an overbearing, paternalistic posture endemic to liberal democracies? What is the connection between a liberal domestic order and a liberal international order? Can liberalism defend individual rights without promoting excessive individualism? And can the individualism of liberalism be reconciled with the human need for group identity, a need recognized by nationalism?

To find a way out of our current morass, we need to acknowledge liberalism’s universalizing tendencies without despairing of integrating it with and balancing it against political particularism. Defending liberalism requires that we appreciate the virtue of nationalism.

THE CASE FOR NATIONALISM

Yoram Hazony presents nationalism and liberalism as opposed political positions. To Hazony, nationalism is a principled stand in favor of a world of nation-states, all “cultivating their own traditions and pursuing
their own interests without interference.” Liberalism, by contrast, is an inherently imperialist political philosophy that justifies the global spread of its political principles by claiming to be the sole legitimate form of government.

Contrary to more recent trends, Hazony reminds us, nationalism and national self-determination were central and respected elements of the Western world in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. But nationalism was discredited by the ruthlessness of regimes such as Nazi Germany and imperial Japan (unfairly, Hazony believes, since in his interpretation the expansionism of these regimes suggests an imperialist rather than a nationalist disposition). Defining themselves in opposition to both Nazism and Soviet communism, Western democracies came to see themselves as defenders of a cosmopolitan, universalist, and international liberal political and economic order. Thus through a series of historical accidents, it became difficult to conceive of freedom independent of liberalism. But, Hazony argues, liberalism in fact undermines the grounds of political liberty by corroding the mutual loyalty and sense of collective identity that give rise to trust and cooperation, which are the prerequisites of individual freedom and collective self-rule.

For Hazony, both the EU and the effort to establish an American “world order” are imperial projects, because “their purpose is to remove decision-making from the hands of independent national governments and place it in the hands of international governments or bodies.” Since liberalism is devoted to individual rights at the expense of communal cohesion, it cannot help but favor such cosmopolitan political structures—and ultimately a world state that would most efficiently assure the conditions for liberal individualism.

Hazony traces the flaws and errors of liberalism to their roots in Locke’s emphasis on contract as the basis of obligation. Whereas Locke suggests that “the individual becomes a member of a human collective only because he has agreed to it, and has obligations toward such collectives only if he has accepted them,” in fact “the most basic bonds that hold society together” are those we inherit. The Lockean emphasis on contract obscures the significance of the “institutions that result from and impart bonds of loyalty and common purpose” like “the national state, community, family, and religious tradition.”

Offering us examples of a better approach, Hazony celebrates the political practice of British and American statesmen of the first part of the
20th century—men like Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill—who understood nationalism and national self-determination to be core features of a “just, diverse, and relatively peaceful” world.

But this leads to a tension in Hazony’s presentation: In theory, liberalism and nationalism are opposed political philosophies, but in practice they have at times gone together quite harmoniously. Indeed, the historical record of Britain and America seems to show that they are most successful when operating in tandem. And while he decries liberalism, Hazony nevertheless favors a form of government aimed at promoting “the development of free institutions” and preserving “individual liberties.”

Thus, Hazony isolates one version of liberalism—admittedly the original version—stemming from Hobbes and Locke, calls that liberalism, and then favors a different political philosophy, which he identifies with conservatism or nationalism but which is better understood as a second version of liberalism, one enriched with a robust defense of those institutions that promote human communal solidarity. One revealing indication of this is that the figure Hazony references most frequently in defending his position is John Stuart Mill, a self-described liberal. The version of liberalism Hazony favors (although he calls it conservatism) is represented by the philosophies of Mill, Edmund Burke, and John Selden.

Moderating the absolute claims of natural freedom, equality, and independence made by Hobbes and Locke, these figures recognize the importance of nationality, national character, mutual loyalty, and fellow-feeling in sustaining a free political order. They are not contract theorists, and they are open to the desirability of national political diversity. Hazony attributes this openness to what he calls their empiricism: “a moderate skepticism with regard to the products of human reason” and the belief that “only through…many national experiments” can we learn, “over historical time, what is in fact best.”

Although overlooked by Hazony, Montesquieu is another such figure, as he too is open to political pluralism. Montesquieu praises the rule of law, commerce, the separation and balance of powers, and representative government, but is hostile to prescriptive systems and insists that laws should reflect national, geographic, historical, and religious context. Accordingly, it is a matter of great importance—of “genius”—to know “in which cases there must be uniformity and in which
differences,” a maxim that holds both within and among states. As a theorist particularly sensitive to the conditions of liberalism, Montesquieu is in the same broad camp as Burke, Tocqueville, and Mill, all of whom judge liberalism to be the most just political order, while recognizing that abstract theories are always instantiated in concrete particulars. Thus, universal principles of individual freedom and human equality must be inflected by what Montesquieu called “the spirit of a nation.” This is related to their belief that for liberalism to take hold, certain conditions must be in place, such as the idea of private property, the idea of the individual, and the pursuit of certain types of economic activity.

Montesquieu’s liberalism and his respect for national diversity spring from a modesty about what we can know. He would agree with Hazony’s criticism of the “unbounded trust in human reason” exemplified by theorists such as Locke and Kant who, Hazony writes, boldly assert that “great universal truths are already at hand, and that this knowledge needs now only to be brought to bear on humanity.” Montesquieu would also agree with Hazony’s argument that we nevertheless do know enough about the human good to mount a persuasive case that the rule of law, market economics, and individual rights are humanly desirable. And he would concur with Hazony’s warning against believing that our grasp of these general ideas provides sufficient guidance about particular political arrangements to justify interfering in other national states with the aim of imposing any one particular instantiation of those ideas.

Hazony believes we can be most confident about the universal desirability of the rule of law, which is necessary for any legitimate political order. But the desirability of market economics and individual rights is less clear-cut, and we should be ready to respect different national decisions about economics, degrees of protection for personal freedoms, and religious establishment.

Hazony cogently argues that nationalism is the necessary substrate for the rule of law, market economics, and individual rights because, in the first place, the endurance of any state depends on the mutual loyalty of its citizens, which is founded on “genuine commonalities of language or religion, and...a past history of uniting in wartime.” This loyalty is the basis for the willingness “to sacrifice [one’s] own momentary political advantage...for the collective good of the nation”—a willingness required for the existence of free institutions, which depend on balancing and limiting political power. Non-despotic political orders need a
citizenry imbued with a sense of fraternity or collective identity, trust, and communal concern. Since Lockean liberalism seems ill-attuned to these reflections, there is a strong case to be made that it fails to nurture the conditions for free institutions and individual liberties.

Hazony’s criticism of the domestic effects of liberalism is complemented by a concern pertinent to international politics, namely that any position that prescribes one true political construction fosters an absolute and intolerant philosophic and political attitude—one he identifies as imperial. But he fails to acknowledge that if we think our political creed—or any political creed—is right, it will be difficult to avoid universal prescriptions. Moreover, the desire for rational justification is built into the modern dynamic of the West, and this means we have to justify our politics by appeals to universals—to standards of natural right, to truths about justice. Particular national traditions exist within this framework. They will succeed only by acknowledging the significance of this universalizing vector, defending their laws and ways as interpretations of broader principles.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

There is also an elephant in the room that Hazony doesn’t fully acknowledge, which has been the primary subject of most of the criticism of his argument. It should be stipulated that Hazony’s defense of nationalism is intended to stave off far-right, racist ideologies; his contention is that, absent the bulwark of a national identity, tribal identities will reassert themselves and undermine the political order from within. Nevertheless, Hazony’s near-silence concerning race and ethnicity could be interpreted as a revealing avoidance of a pernicious recurring feature of nationalism. A skeptic could reasonably argue that nationalism contains the seeds of jingoism, xenophobia, racism, and sectarianism. This challenge has to be confronted; any promotion of patriotic nationalism must be vigilant in guarding against the danger of drifting toward extremes of exclusion, intolerance, and aggression. Not only the content of national identity but also the tenor and tone of its expression must be carefully cultivated to prevent corruption.

Hazony’s critique of liberalism becomes more sharply defined when juxtaposed with the more conventional diagnosis of liberalism’s troubles found in the recent writings of Francis Fukuyama, including in his 2018 book, Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment.
Although Hazony and Fukuyama disagree about what the content of collective identity ought to be, they concur that our contemporary crisis is a product of liberalism’s weakness in generating bonds of mutual respect and affection among citizens. As our trust in one another wanes, citizens of Western liberal democracies are losing the conditions for collective deliberation and consensus; Fukuyama identifies this as our biggest political problem.

Fukuyama sees identity politics as the manifestation of a reaction on both the left and right to the dissatisfactions of globalization and liberalization, compounded by the damage done to the idea of an “open and liberal world order” by recent economic crises. As the left championed the interests of an ever-growing number of diverse groups, the right turned to defend a more univocal national identity, one often connected to race, ethnicity, or religion.

Fukuyama posits that the conditions for trust, deliberation, and consensus require “larger and more integrative national identities”; as a solution, he recommends the cultivation of creedal identity. Creedal identity is not built around shared personal characteristics, lived experiences, historical ties, or religious convictions. It consists in “core values and beliefs” and “foundational ideas” such as “constitutionalism, rule of law, and human equality” in the United States or “liberty, equality, and fraternity” in France.

But is this enough? The signatories of the Paris Statement—such as Pierre Manent, Rémi Brague, and Roger Scruton—would judge such civic nationalism to be necessary but insufficient for nurturing bonds of loyalty and mutual accountability. Hazony describes a version of Fukuyama’s position as that of the “neutral state,” concerned “only with the common defense of the population, keeping the peace, and ensuring the rights and freedoms of the individual,” but “without particularistic commitments to any of the different nations, languages, or religions within its borders.” Hazony argues that such a neutral state is unsustainable, that constitutional patriotism is not enough unless it is transformed into a civil religion or fused with a national tradition. Echoing Tocqueville, Hazony suggests that the American nation is not just an abstract construct, but “an English-speaking nation whose constitutional and religious traditions were originally rooted in the Bible, Protestantism, republicanism, and the common law of England. The passage of centuries, and the incorporation of a large Catholic
community and other smaller communities, means...that new tribes have been adopted into this same American nation. But this has not in any way changed the fact that Americans remain a single, highly distinctive nation.”

To be sure, Fukuyama’s vision for creational national identity entails “more than passive acceptance of a creed.” It also requires the “exercise of certain virtues” such as public-spiritedness, patriotism, and willing participation. And Fukuyama notes that “traditions of statehood and common national purpose” are extremely helpful ballasts against political turmoil and instability. Nevertheless, he thinks we can dispense with much of what Hazony prescribes.

LIBERALISM IN A WORLD OF NATIONS

If a robust national identity is the condition for a sustainable and satisfying form of liberal politics, then a responsible foreign policy would promote the global conditions in which different nations are free to interpret and instantiate universal liberal ideals differently. The first step toward a liberalism that is friendly to nationalism would be a renewed emphasis on national sovereignty in the international realm.

In his 2017 address to the United Nations General Assembly, President Trump called for “a great reawakening of nations, for the revival of their spirits, their pride, their people, and their patriotism.” He argued that his administration would renew the principle of sovereignty in foreign affairs and seek allies and trading partners in a manner respectful of national differences — differences in cultures, values, traditions, and even systems of government. Trump acknowledged certain limits to this principle: He said that nations are accountable for caring for their people’s interests. Thus, “America stands with every person living under a brutal regime. Our respect for sovereignty is also a call for action. All people deserve a government that cares for their safety, their interests, and their wellbeing, including their prosperity.”

Notably absent from Trump’s list is any mention of liberty. In its strongest manifestations, such an emphasis on national sovereignty would mean giving up on a longstanding aspect of the foreign policy of liberal nations: the conviction that we should be concerned for the liberty of other peoples, not merely their security and prosperity.

Some bristle at the prospect of this abandonment and the realist foreign policy advocated by the Trump administration on principled
as well as practical grounds. Neoconservatives warn that any American retreat will spell disaster for the international liberal order that in world-historical terms has proved relatively stable and peaceful. Authors such as Robert Kagan warn that withdrawing to pursue only our narrowly conceived national self-interest would have far-reaching unintended consequences. In his 2018 book, *The Jungle Grows Back*, Kagan argues that we are all too cognizant of the costs of American hegemony, while failing to recognize the benefits of liberal internationalism. Whereas nationalists like Hazony see liberal hegemony as threatening the older Westphalian system of independent nation-states, Kagan fears the West’s loss of faith in the liberal world order.

Kagan targets what he identifies as a new consensus born of a deep national pessimism following setbacks in the Middle East and the financial crisis of 2008. Displacing the optimism of the 1990s, this new realism “calls for restraint and retrenchment,” holding “that the world [is] intractable” and “that the United States . . . lack[s] the power to shape it effectively.” Kagan points to the 2016 election as “a repudiation of the old strategy” of liberal hegemony. Of the “four major political figures on the national stage . . . Obama, Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, and Hillary Clinton,” only Hillary “stood for the old grand strategy.”

President Trump, in Kagan’s eyes, has driven a stake through the heart of the liberal world order. Whereas “[i]n the past the goal had not been to beat other nations, and least of all allies, but to seek mutual advantage,” Trump operates on the premise that the international arena is “a struggle of all against all,” a zero-sum game in which America should score “wins” against friends as well as enemies.

Kagan’s defense of liberal hegemony is predicated on a recognition of the fragility of the world we inhabit. “[W]e have lived inside the bubble of the liberal world order so long that we have forgotten what that world ‘as it is’ really looks like.” Absent a liberal hegemon, the world reverts to the natural state of things—violent multipolar competition, instability, insecurity, and domination. The default state is something like what the foreign-policy realists imagine: It is anarchic and competitive. Yet we can pacify this state of conflict to a substantial extent, Kagan argues, not solely by means of liberal international institutions and liberal cooperation and consensus, as the liberal internationalists believe—although those are elements of the solution—but essentially and crucially by means of a hegemonic power. This power underwrites
a set of norms and institutions, providing security guarantees by means of its towering military might. Such security provides the conditions for “an open economic order in which others [are] allowed to compete and succeed”—in contrast to both Trump’s economic nationalism and China’s neo-mercantilism.

From Kagan’s perspective, while we should acknowledge that all international orders come with tradeoffs, concerns about liberalism’s potential imperial trajectory are misplaced. He insists that the historical record is clear: Only in the liberal world order anchored by the United States have imperial powers such as Britain voluntarily divested themselves of colonial possessions and responsibilities. And only on account of liberal hegemony have formerly aggressive nations such as Germany and Japan been so quickly integrated into a peaceful international order. In light of such observations, Kagan mounts a strong case that the liberal world order is in fact all that stands between us and the return of aggressive imperial projects characteristic of a “competitive multipolar world.” Liberalism is fragile, and we can best protect and sustain it if we aim for a responsible, equitable, and self-restrained hegemony.

Kagan would accordingly urge Hazony to face up to the violent and destabilizing consequences of the multipolar world he prefers. Hazony would respond that he is prepared for more wars, but has reason to think that national wars will be of a more limited kind than those inspired by universalist political aims. And Hazony is not averse to a strong United States; he only wants to avoid a hegemonic United States, with “allies” who are little more than dependencies. America can and should lead salutary multipolar alliances to handle bad actors like China, North Korea, Iran, and Russia.

Even if Kagan’s analysis of international relations is correct, however, Hazony’s claim that liberalism is not a fully satisfying or universally appealing political philosophy remains a substantial objection. A hegemonic power that is able to maintain peace between states might still be undermined from within if the version of liberalism we pursue is incongruent with human nature. Kagan’s single-minded focus on the threats facing a fragile international system leads him to downplay the potential shortcomings of liberalism as a political philosophy.

Thus, Kagan dismisses nationalism as irrational tribalism and praises the European Union for submerging old national differences in “a new pan-European identity.” Where Hazony sees justifiable rumblings of
national political particularism in Europe, Kagan sees people being driven “back to tribalism” by “[n]ew forms of insecurity.” Criticizing the contemporary wave of populism as merely atavistic and reactionary, Kagan thinks apprehensions about globalization are misplaced. His prescription for what ails us is a rededication to the truth and goodness of liberalism and a reaffirmation of human freedom as our highest value. In response to contemporary objections, Kagan might echo Churchill: Liberal democracy is “the worst form of Government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Accordingly, Kagan’s only foil for liberalism is strongman authoritarianism. The appeal of leaders like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping remains a perpetual challenge to liberalism because their political popularity rests on deep features of human nature: “the yearning for the security of family, tribe, and nation.” Such authoritarian leaders are resolutely opposed to “individual rights, freedom, universality, equality, regardless of race or national origin,” and to “cosmopolitanism and tolerance.”

Kagan’s portrait suggests that we face a choice between two paths, liberalism and illiberalism. But perhaps his binary typology is insufficiently nuanced to provide the guidance we need in our current crisis. A more fruitful way of framing our current options would emphasize the flexibility of liberalism and the possibilities for responding to and incorporating the concerns of populists within a liberal framework. At the same time, we should take seriously the challenge that Kagan’s position raises for Hazony; namely, that Hazony does not appreciate the conditions for peaceful international coexistence, and in particular the substantial benefits of a liberal hegemon. Yet perhaps both thinkers fall prey to the assumption that liberalism and nationalism are simply antithetical.

B A L A N C I N G L I B E R A L I S M A N D N A T I O N A L I S M

Rather than seeing liberalism as the enemy of nationalism, the challenge of our political moment is to explore possible ways of harmonizing the two. We should begin by recognizing that this is not a new challenge. It is in fact as old as liberalism itself. As early as the 18th century, Montesquieu recognized the tension between liberal universalism and national particularism. He provides a model for how one can think liberalism’s moral principles just, and tolerance and individual rights universally desirable, while also believing that such universal principles
need not be uniformly implemented. Montesquieu criticizes those who forget that times and circumstances call for particularity. The heterogeneity of national traditions—“the infinite diversity of laws and mores”—is itself an outgrowth of human nature, of our responses to the variety of challenges we face in the natural and moral worlds. To deny or eradicate all such differences would be to do violence to human nature. It would also be to miss the satisfactions and attractions of national diversity.

It is important to acknowledge liberalism’s limits while simultaneously recognizing its profound advantages. As Dennis Hale and Marc Landy argue in a recent rebuttal to Patrick Deneen’s *Why Liberalism Failed*, liberalism cannot “satisfy the heart’s deepest longings for redemption, salvation, communion, and perfection”; nevertheless, it makes space for their pursuit in the private realm. This, they remind us, is the “genius of liberalism.” The precious inheritance of liberalism—individual freedoms, constitutionalism, checks and balances, free markets—has brought extraordinary stability, peace, prosperity, and freedom. But liberalism does not nourish the noblest aspirations of the human soul. It is a political philosophy aimed at comfortable self-preservation, at security and tranquility. It makes room for other ends, but because it cannot recognize a *summum bonum*, a highest good, all positive human goods quickly appear equally valid and therefore equally trivial. It offers us a stable political framework *within which* we can lead good lives, but it does not guarantee that we do so; it provides the necessary but not sufficient conditions for human flourishing.

There is no political solution to the perennial human problem that each generation needs to cultivate virtue anew. Liberalism therefore has to be supplemented by forms of community that speak to the deepest human longings. Insofar as this is being forgotten, we do indeed face a crisis. Only if there are genuinely positive conceptions of the good can the citizens of liberal regimes avoid succumbing to apathetic despair. Human nature requires that we have something to live for. If this is not provided within the liberal framework, illiberal politics will surely follow. This is Hazony’s deepest insight, and his defense of nationalism is an attempt to rescue us from the corrosive effects of liberalism’s founding denial of a *summum bonum*.

Given these fundamental considerations, what practical policies ought we to pursue? Abroad, we can support the revival of distinct
national identities while still advocating for those truths that we hold to be self-evident; a renewed respect for national identity and independent nations need not come at the price of ceasing to promote liberal principles. This will not be easy, however. We will need to balance the impulse (native to our character as liberals) to want to help others secure the blessings of liberty with the active affirmation of and respect for national particularities. Rather than pulling back from international leadership and interpreting national sovereignty to mean that each nation should care for its own interests, a new vision of America’s role on the international stage is required. America remains the indispensable nation. Although a revival of national sovereignties is a suitable corrective to an overly universalizing politics, we ought to be wary of taking the principle too far and falling into an amoral realpolitik that runs counter to those fundamental principles and moral ideals that are at the core of our own national identity.

At home, while Fukuyama’s vision for creedal national identity has much to be said for it, a supplement is necessary. A recent article in the pages of this journal helps to articulate what Fukuyama’s position misses. Wilfred McClay has argued that two strands have been vital to American patriotism — threads that exist in some tension with one another but that are equally important. The first is a creedal patriotism that treasures the grounding ideas of the nation. The second consists in a celebration of shared history, land, and culture (such as music, stories, sports, and heroes). The difference between this cultural patriotism and a blood-and-soil nationalism is the insistence that newcomers and immigrants can join the tradition; racial or ethnic links are explicitly rejected. The first thread is universal; the second is particular. When the United States has been at its best, the two have worked in fruitful combination: “[O]ur nation’s universal ideals have meshed with, and derived strength from, Americans’ local and particular sentiments.”

The content of nationalism will inevitably — and desirably — vary from place to place; in some contexts, language and religion could be drawn on to enrich the particularist thread of patriotism. Although these elements can be divisive, the judicious cultivation of national identity would rely on prudential judgments by statesmen, religious leaders, and social activists about the need to amplify some elements and resist others. As Montesquieu suggested, since laws must be in accord with a nation’s spirit, the very same law can be experienced differently by
different peoples. A law that furthered freedom in one context could be tyrannical in another. For example, a law subsidizing or promoting Christian parochial schools might be experienced by Hungarians as liberating and by the French as oppressive. In light of these facts, the most successful instantiations of liberalism’s core principles will conform to the traditions and spirit of particular places, working as much as possible with the grain of national customs rather than against it.

The challenge of hitting upon a suitably tailored nationalism that avoids nativism and belligerence reflects the perennial problem of grounding strong human attachments in morally decent forms—the problem of forming moral community. As Herbert Storing once wrote, “If we find that we cannot have and do not want a country of ‘every man for himself,’ then we need to give some hard thought to the institutional, educational, and other ways of strengthening the commitment of each American to the community of all Americans.” Even if liberalism is primarily a political system that protects individual rights and individual freedoms, a revitalized nationalism can be a way of restoring moral community, enriching and correcting the conception of a liberal nation as merely an aggregate of competing private interests. Healthy nationalism cultivates a sense of the people as not just a clamoring set of factions representing different interests and identities, but as a whole of some kind, grounding a sense of the first person plural—the political “we” invoked in the pledge of allegiance or the preamble to the Constitution. Participation in moral community thus gives us some reason to identify our private good with the common good.

The formation of such moral community, however, requires deliberately inculcating sentiments and practices that cut against the freewheeling individualism that has become central to contemporary liberalism. As Montesquieu teaches, modern liberal republics are crucially different from classical republics. We moderns cannot make the inculcation of virtue the telos of our politics, not least because we live in a world where religion and politics cannot be seamlessly entwined. Christianity, with its universal moral and theological claims, its trans-political character, and its emphasis on the difference between the city of man and the city of God, irrevocably changed understandings of politics and of the common good. The principled protection of a private sphere and the emergence of modern “civil society” are developments rooted in these changes. Yet we still experience the deep moral
need to identify with and sacrifice for something larger than ourselves. Although liberalism precludes the state from making the inculcation of virtue its aim, modern liberals need not wholly abandon a concern for cultivating moral character, national tradition, and cultural inheritance. We can foster the right kind of patriotism by nurturing the memory of political and cultural heroes, by calibrating the content of public education, and by celebrating important events in the nation’s history. Different liberal nations can thereby encourage suitably differentiated visions of moral and spiritual substance to enrich the cultural and political lives of their citizens.

Authors like Wilfred McClay and Jill Lepore are attempting to give Americans a national story with which to invigorate a new appreciation for American nationhood. Their recently published one-volume histories, *Land of Hope: An Invitation to the Great American Story* and *These Truths: A History of the United States*, are excellent examples of projects that contribute to desirable nationalism. Such narratives give a people a sense of their past and provide content upon which to define the requirements and benefits of citizenship—necessary both for incorporating new generations of young citizens and for the assimilation of immigrants. They also provide the background necessary for investing national symbols with shared meaning. As Adam Gopnik recently noted in discussing the lessons that Charles de Gaulle might have to teach us today, “myths matter. Without a sense of shared symbols, it is impossible for any modern state to go on.” In the end, a salutary effect of Donald Trump’s election may be to inspire thinkers and leaders on both the left and the right to advance renewed visions of American nationhood, in particular how America has succeeded in its particular embodiment of universal moral ideals and principles.

An example of the type of policy that could help cultivate national identity and civic responsibility is a national-service requirement—something proposed by intellectuals like Fukuyama and politicians like British member of parliament Rory Stewart. Although the requirement might have only modest benefits in bolstering citizenship and forging ties of national identity, even small gains would be significant. The vast geographic extent of many modern states, the diversity and mobility of their inhabitants, and the massive edifice of their administrative bureaucracies pose formidable obstacles to nurturing a sense of cohesive, self-governing community and sentiments of national
pride. But salutary forms of liberalism will survive only if we find a way to sustain a modest semblance of these feelings.

A SPIRIT OF MODERATION

The historical record suggests that nationalism and liberalism are not only compatible but co-dependent. After all, nationalism and liberalism share a commitment to self-determination: liberalism at the level of the individual and nationalism at the communal level. Pursued to their extremes, these are mutually exclusive. But both respond to elements of human nature. The tension between nationalism and liberalism is ultimately a reflection of tensions within the human soul.

A spirit of moderation should inform legislators and statesmen, for, as Montesquieu writes, “the political good, like the moral good, is always found between two limits.” Yet moderation is not only the avoidance of extremes, but the integration of different and even opposed principles, interests, and concerns. A moderate liberalism would restrain the universalizing vectors in international organizations like the UN, the IMF, and the EU. It would remain sensitive to the conditions for any successful liberalism, in particular the social bond that precedes the possibility for political liberty. It would also recognize that, although liberalism’s universalism makes powerful liberal nations prone to engage in imperial interventionism, we remain perfectly free to moderate the tendency toward hegemony with a respect for national differences, state sovereignty, and cultural particularity. Liberal aspirations can be tempered by a heavy dose of humility about efforts to transform the world, given the rarity of the conditions necessary for sustainable liberal-democratic government.

To meet the political challenge of our time, we need to foster a moderate liberalism — a liberalism leavened by nationalism at home and tempered by a respect for national sovereignty abroad. If we fail to meet this challenge, liberalism faces a bleak future. “[G]overnment of the people, by the people, for the people” will be at grave risk.